



**TRAUMATIZED CONSCIOUSNESS IN
LYUDMILA RUBLEWSKAYA'S NOVEL THE
DAGUERROTYPE**

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ABSTRACT

With the tragic events of the 20th century investigation of trauma as a psychic phenomenon has acquired paramount importance. It is an interdisciplinary subject involving doctors, psychologists, philosophers, writers. The Lost Generation authors and modernists were the first to address the problem of emotional shocks experienced by their heroes during WWI. Since then trauma, its causes and consequences have been one of the essential thematic components of world literature and, consequently, trauma studies have become an object of scholarly interest in the last decades of the 20th century in various humanitarian spheres.

The present article addresses the way the contemporary Belarusian writer Lyudmila Rublewaskaya represents traumatized consciousness in her novel "The Daguerrotype" (2014). The novel draws its title from an old daguerreotype described in it. It was found by two contemporary young people together with a diary recounting the events of the late 19th century. The novel consists of two parts called "The Book of the Inner Circle" and "The Book of the Outer Circle" which are set in two interrelated time planes – the late 19th century and our time respectively. Through the intricately interwoven life stories of five personages the writer looks into various kinds of trauma, exposes their

reasons, traces their consequences and describes her heroes' ways of overcoming the mental distress. The traumatic experience of the characters was either due to the socio-political atmosphere in Russia in the late 19th century, or to a combination of a tragic accident, superstition and manipulation, or to a clash of rough force and nobleness. The significance of unveiling a person's secret through narration for overcoming the traumatic psychic aftermath is illustrated in the novel, too.

Key words: trauma; injury; shock; revenge; consequences; folklore; werewolf.

АНОТАЦІЯ

У зв'язку з трагічними подіями 20-го століття дослідження травми як психічного феномену набуло велику значущість. Ця міждисциплінарна галузь привертає увагу медиків, психологів, філософів, письменників. Саме автори втраченого покоління і модерністи першими звернулися до проблеми, зображуючи емоційні потрясіння, які відчували їхні герої під час Першої світової війни. З тих пір травма, її причини та наслідки є однією з важливих тематичних складників світової літератури, й дослідження травми стало предметом наукового інтересу в різних галузях гуманітарних знань в останні десятиріччя 20-го століття.

У цій статті розглядається те, як представлена травмована свідомість у романі сучасної білоруської письменниці Людмили Рублевської «Дагерротип» (2014). Назва роману походить від знайдених двома молодими людьми, нашими сучасниками, старого дагерротипа та щоденникових записів, які зображують події кінця 19-го століття, що стає зав'язкою дії. Роман складається з двох частин, які названі «Книга внутрішнього кола» та «Книга зовнішнього кола», дія яких відбувається в двох взаємопов'язаних часах пластах – наприкінці 19-го століття та в наші дні відповідно. Через тісно переплетені життєві історії своїх героїв письменниця зображує різні види травм, розкриває їхні причини, простежує наслідки та окреслює засоби подолання персонажами душевних потрясінь. Травмований досвід героїв було викликано абосоціально-політичною атмосферою в Росії наприкінці 19-го століття, або сполучення нещасного випадку, забобонів і маніпуляцій, або зіштовхненням грубої сили та шляхетності в наші дні. У романі також зображено важливість розкриття глибоко захованої таємниці для подолання психічної травми.

Ключові слова: травма; ушкодження; шок; помста; наслідки; фольклор; перевертень.

INTRODUCTION

The tragic events, experienced by millions in the 20th century, and their traumatic aftermath made the study of trauma of paramount importance both for scientists engaged in various areas related to a human being and for people working in the field of art and literature. The growing interest in the phenomenon was accompanied by a shift in the meaning of the word “trauma” itself which initially meant a wound. The shift may be exemplified by the definitions of the word taken from two editions of the Oxford Dictionary. While the 1929 edition defines trauma only as “a morbid condition of body produced by wound or external violence” [The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1929); 1308], in the early 21st century issue an accent is made on the psychic facet of trauma: “a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time” [Hornby (2005); 1634] while its physical aspect is relegated to the third place in the entry. According to Roger Luckhurst, the transfer of meaning from the physical to the psychic was due to the recognition by medical people “that accident victims could escape physical injury completely, yet suffer persistent forms of mental distress long after the event” [Luckhurst (2006);498]

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of trauma and traumatic effect was initiated by Z. Freud in the early 20th century. In their “Introduction” to the book “Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction” J.-M. Ganteau and S. Onega write “...it is Freud’s name that inevitably crops up most often in literature on the subject, with “Moses and Monotheism” (1939) as the most quoted of the texts. Earlier essays like “Thoughts for the Time on War and Death” (1915) and “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) are also widely recognized as having played an essential part in the definition of the psychic trauma as different from and, in principle, unrelated to physical trauma” [Onega (2011); 9].

Freud laid the foundation of trauma theory which was taken up and developed by other psychoanalysts, Carl G. Jung among them. As a result of his observation

of psychiatric cases Jung came to the conclusion that, as a rule, a patient has some secret story unknown to others, which he described as “the rock against which he is shattered” and asserted “If I know his secret story, I have a key to the treatment” [Jung(1965); 117]. Jung considered that psychiatric treatment should begin with unveiling the secret, which could be done through narration. It was this idea that, practically, paved the way for literary investigation of trauma and its effects. J.-M. Ganteau and S. Onega point out that “it is this narrative aspect of trauma that makes the findings of trauma studies so relevant for creative writers and critics alike” [Onega (2011); 12].

In the last decades of the 20th century trauma studies became an object of scholarly interest in various humanitarian spheres. In their article “Trauma Studies: История, репрезентация, свидетель” (Trauma Studies: History, Representation, Witness) O. Moroz and E. Suverina make a brief survey of investigations of the traumatic aftermath of the XX century catastrophic events by the world eminent scholars, pointing out that the works of Sh. Felman, E. Santner, C. Caruth and others have become classical texts on the theory of trauma and ways of their representation [Moroz, Suverina (2014)]. The 2009 substantial (903 pages) collection “Травма: punkty” contains articles by the above mentioned and other scholars who, according to its compilers, analyze trauma as an event which not only radically changes a person’s life but continues to affect his/her attitude to the past, present and future [Ushakin (2009); 7]. The authors of the essays look into various cases of trauma experienced on individual, personal, collective, community, state levels and represent ways in which people learn to live with traumas – “neither suppressing, nor ousting their negative effects but finding place for it in their lives and narratives” [Ushakin, (2009); 8].

A similar compilation of essays on trauma seen from various – psychological, philosophical, ethical and other perspectives – is presented in “Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation” (2014).

Though the critical theory about the cultural and ethical implications of trauma in fiction started to intensively develop in the late 20th century, literary practice, that is, description of various cases of trauma and traumatic effects on a person’s psyche by men of letters began much earlier. It was boosted by the tragedy of the First World War and became manifest, first and foremost, in the works of modernists like V. Wolf or W. Faulkner with their profound interest in human psychology. All kinds of traumas and traumatized consciousness are often dealt with in contemporary

literature, too, which, consequently, has led to a number of critique publications examining the representation of traumatic experience by today's writers and poets. In her work "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History" C. Caruth points out that fiction is an adequate tool for reproducing traumatic experience where the real victims fail, i.e. in the situations of the so-called unspeakability [Caruth(1996); 9]. On the one hand, literary works may offer very valuable material for trauma studies, on the other, trauma theory may influence literary criticism. C. Caruth substantiates this interrelation: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytical theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet" [Caruth (1996);9]

The recent decades have witnessed a great number of research publications on literary representation of trauma. One of them is the abovementioned volume "Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction" which contains a number of essays on individual writers (P. Barker, M. Amis, I. McEwan, J. Winterson and others) seen from the perspective of trauma representation. One of the most recent publications on the subject is the book "Trauma and Literature" (2018) edited by J. Roger Kurtz, where twenty-one essays offer an overview of the origin and development of literary trauma theory and trace the evolution of the concept of trauma in literary studies.

AIM OF THE ARTICLE

Belarusian literature is rich in works highlighting the tragic events of the country's history. Suffice it to mention the play "Raskidanaye Hnyazdo" (The Ruined Nest, 1913) by Yanka Kupala with its heroes' unavailing striving for land ownership, or the tragic war stories by Vasil Bykau, or the books by the Nobel Prize winner Svyatlana Aleksievich documenting the tragedy of WWII and Chernobyl disaster to see how traumatic the life experience of Belarusian people has been. However the issue of trauma representation in the national literature has not been devoted enough attention to in the literary studies. The aim of the present article is to throw light on the way this problem is dealt with in the novel "Daheratyp" (The Daguerrotype, 2014) by the contemporary Belarusian writer Lyudmila Rublevskaya.

Hardly has this well-known and prolific author of a number of adventure and

quasihistorical novels had the problem of trauma in her mind as an object of artistic investigation while writing “The Daguerrotype”. Yet this work presents a fairly appropriate and substantial material for the study of traumatized consciousness.

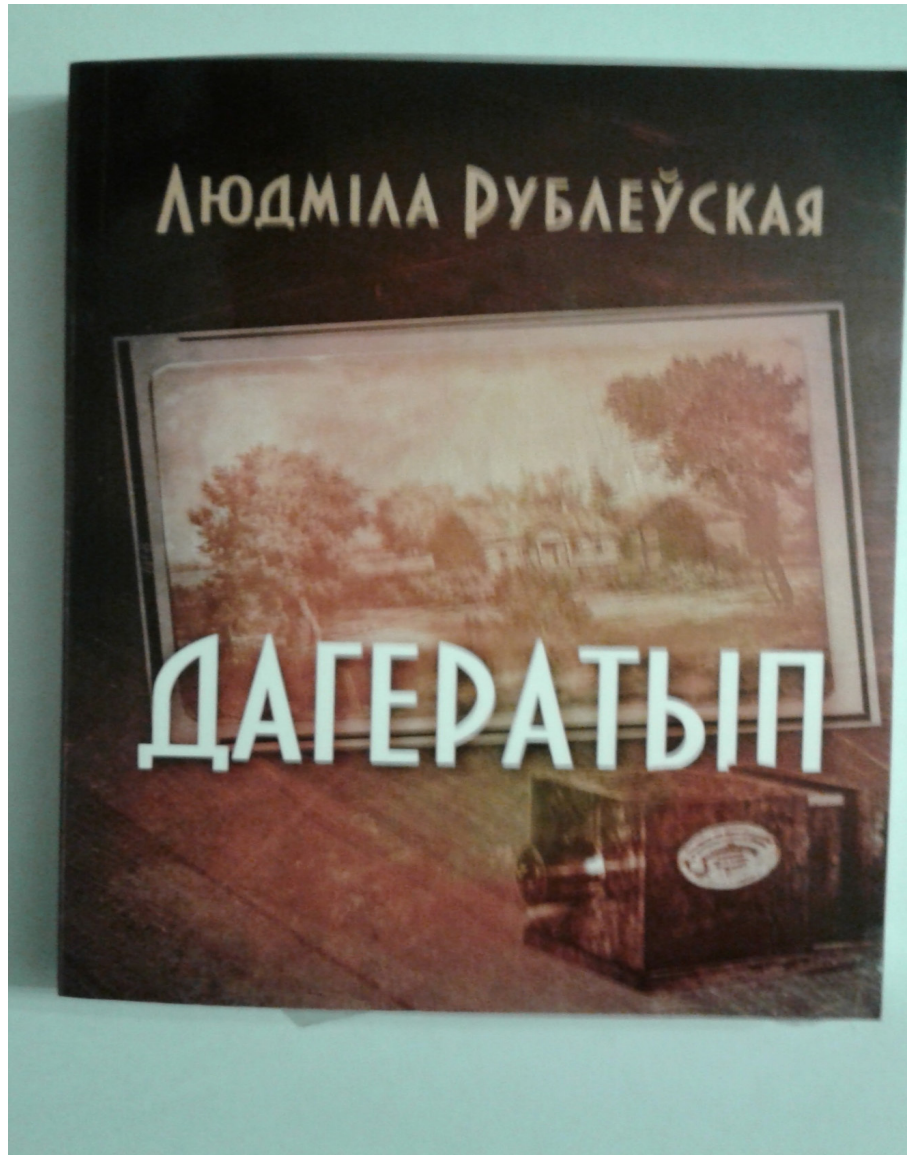
METHODOLOGY

The research has been carried out on the basis of combination of various scholarly principles and methods which include a brief survey of trauma studies and their history and a review of several publications on the subject. The historical approach was used to analyze the events of the novel from the perspective of the late 19th century political atmosphere in Russia, while the life story of one of the principal characters demanded a study of some folklore elements, namely the beliefs and superstitions of the werewolves myth.

RESULTS

Like most of Rublewskaya’s novels “The Daguerrotype” presents an intricate combination of various genres. According to V. Barowka, Rublewskaya belongs to those contemporary Belarusian writers who are actively engaged in formal experimenting by modifying traditional genres [Barowka (2018); 92]. First and foremost “The Daguerrotype” is an adventure novel as it has a fairly dynamic and entertaining plot with rapidly changing scenes and episodes. It has elements of a historical novel, too, for the action takes place in the late 19th century and a number of real events are recalled – the assassination of the Russian czar Alexander III, the 1863 anti-Russia revolt in what was then known as the North-Western Province of Russia and ensuing exiles of its participants to Siberia, the Jew pogroms, etc. The two main characters are terrorists who call themselves ‘the inquisitors of the revolution’ and are planning an assassination of a member of the czarist family. This plane of the novel is interwoven with a philosophical one: on many occasions the personages conduct heated arguments on validity of terrorism, on human nature and social order, on the ways of reforming an individual, etc. It also has a detective line for there are attempts at and actual murders. The novel also contains a love subplot which ends tragically because of the treacherous act of one of the personages. The last but not the least in determining the multigenre nature of “The Daguerrotype” is presence of

gothic elements in it – an old gloomy manor with its scary cellar and rooms full of mysterious artefacts, all dealing with charms, curses and other witchcraft things.



The novel is permeated with intertextuality: besides historical references there are numerous literary ones – to “The Red Riding Hood” and “The Queen of Eels”, to Shakespeare’s characters and Calderone’s “Life as a Dream”, to Flaubert, Dostoewski, Conan Doyle and others. The writer builds the life story of one of the main characters on folklore myths and legends of werewolves.

The genre eclecticism, intertextuality and complicated plot structure give us the right to consider the novel a specimen of postmodernist writing. “In the novel devices of a realistic novel are masterfully intertwined with postmodernist poetics, elements of adventure and analysis. The leitmotif of the writer’s novels is the idea

of preservation of historical memory, which prevents a contemporary person from turning into a being without kith or kin” [Barowka (2015);173-174].

The novel has a framing structure – it has two time levels called “The Book of the Outer Circle” and “The Book of the Inner Circle”, the former dealing with our times, the latter set in the late 19th century. In the first part of “The Outer Circle” a journalist student girl nicknamed Simka and a young biologist Haliash, both living in today’s Minsk, spend a week reading Haliash’s great grandmother’s diary which they occasionally found, together with an old daguerreotype, among the old things stored in the latter’s flat. The story which unfolds in the notes constitutes the contents of “The Book of the Inner Circle”. The findings make the two young people go and visit the scene of the events described in the diary. Their adventures during their visit to the village of Zhuhavichi form the other part of “The Book of the Outer Circle”.

“The Book of the Inner Circle” is set in Belarus in 1893 and is centred round three people: a middle-aged photographer Varaksa Nihel, his adopted daughter Bohuslava and Earl Shyman Kahanetzki, an heir to an old noble Belarusian family and owner of a manor named Zhuhavichi. All the three main characters experience shocks of various kinds which impact their lives, predetermine their behaviour and shape their views on life, on themselves and on the surrounding world.

Varaksa Nihel is a pseudonym of a fictitious terrorist Yan Ranarych. In his childhood he witnessed an act of extreme injustice and violent humiliation inflicted on his father, a very skillful watchmaker and an idealistic believer in freedom, by a drunken wealthy landowner. The rich client suspected the watchmaker of stealing his property and called for the police. Later he recalled his complaint but the father was so severely beaten by the police that he was brought home unconscious. The emotional trauma that the boy experienced had an everlasting effect on him. “I ran after him when they were taking him to the police station but I did not cry because I knew that crying was shameful. Five years later both my father and I joined the insurgents. And then I became a citizen of the world” [Rublewskaya (2014); 73-74]. The shock fostered in Nihel a desire for revenge and turned him into a ruthless, merciless person who stopped at nothing to annihilate anyone who, in his views, stood in his way and betrayed the cause of struggle for social justice. Hence, his pseudonym which bears a hint to the movement of Nihilism, which “eventually deteriorated into an ethos of subversion, destruction, and anarchy, and by the later 1870s, a nihilist was anyone associated with clandestine political groups advocating terrorism and

assassination” [Pratt (2001)]. Nihel became one of those staunch fighters against the czarist regime who considered terrorism a justifiable means of doing away with it. All his actions served one aim – to do away with injustice. Even his seemingly charitable act – sheltering a little orphan girl – was aimed at it, too. He adopted her only to make her a cover and a tool for accomplishing his terrorist plans.

His adopted daughter Bahuslava (Bahuta) had also experienced an emotional trauma in her childhood. Nihel had found her in a boarding school where she, a 13-year-old orphaned daughter of a Polish officer exiled to Siberia, was constantly teased and humiliated by other girls. He encountered her at the very moment when she was in a state of trance because, led to the extreme by the abusers, she had just, as she thought, killed one of them. The image of her victim lying prostrate on the ground would haunt her for many years after; again and again she would recall the scene of the assumed murder. L. Rublewskya offers her readers access into her heroine’s mind during the traumatic event which conveys her subjective perception of time and reality: “Bahuta can’t recall how it all happened. Though the events of that May day still turned in her memory like a witch’s spinning wheel” [Rublewskaya (2014), 41]. When her victim fell down she felt as if she were in a desert, with silence ringing in her ears. She was transfixed with horror at the thought that she was a murderer.

Nihel skillfully and cynically made use of the girl’s state by praising her and offering her his protection. On the one hand, he saved Bohuslava from an inevitable severe punishment and managed to help her overcome the shock and dragged her out of the imminent depression which might have come through her possible repeated mental reenactment of the murder. On the other hand, true to his political fanaticism, he instilled in her the idea that she was an inborn killer, made her his accomplice and taught her all kinds of skills necessary for concealing and accomplishing terrorist activities. Under his guidance she cultivated various skills necessary for an assassin and at times even prided herself on it. A good psychologist and manipulator, Nihel channelled her persistent sense of guilt into a belief that performing terrorist attacks for political reasons was her mission. This belief, as well as the constant fear of punishment for the murder, mixed with a natural sense of gratitude to Nihel, turned her into an obedient tool in his hands even though at times she was shocked by her foster father’s monstrosity in relation to alleged enemies. Thus, the emotional trauma led her into a sort of moral dead alley from which she exited only when she learned that her victim had survived and realized that Nihel had concealed it from her in

order to maintain her sense of guilt and to manipulate her.

While Nihel's and Bohuslava's life stories look quite probable and realistic, Shyman Kahanezki's line of the novel is invested with mysticism. Like the other two Shyman was also traumatized in childhood, but his trauma was of a more complicated nature. It was a combination of a physical wound with an emotional shock which eventually developed into a sort of psychosis. When he was five he and his mother were attacked by wolves which killed the woman and wounded the boy. "I told you", said the earl, "that my mother was killed by wolves when she was coming home through the forest in a carriage. The matter is that I was with her. The driver died immediately. I saw a wolf seize him by the throat and pull him to the ground. I remember the horses wheezing and blood pouring from their wounds. Mother covered me with her body. That's the last thing I remember" [Rublewskaya (2014); 90]. Shyman's story made Bahuslava suppose that the accident was the source of the local legend that the earl had been bitten by a werewolf. According to the popular belief a man who had a contact with a werewolf was likely to turn into one himself now and then. By elaborate manipulation and fraud of his late father's relatives Kahanezki was made to believe that he had this propensity, too.

The combination of the physical wound and psychic shock brought about his nervous breakdown and caused epilepsy from which the boy was cured by his stepmother's brother, Dr. Bounar. But the doctor treated him with mescaline, a remedy made of some plants, which caused delusions. The Bounars made Shyman believe that every year on the day when his mother was killed and he bitten by a wolf he had his fits of lycanthropy, went berserk and murdered people, his own father among them. They convinced him that on such occasions he should come to his family estate and lock himself there so as not to harm anyone. By skillful manipulation and fraud they planned to eventually place Shyman in a lunatic asylum and take over his property, thus taking a revenge on the Kahanezki family for a century-old feud. In a conversation with Nihel and Bahuslava the doctor assured them of Shyman's malady as a mania dangerous to others: "I think you know about the horrible accident with wolves that Shyman experienced in his childhood. In addition there are family legends – you must have seen a wolf in the Kahanezkis' coat-of-arms and heard horrifying local myths. No wonder that the poor boy developed this mania", [Rublewskaya (2014); 139] said Dr. Bounar.

L. Rublewskaya complements the story of Shyman's trauma with popular

beliefs and legends of werewolves. His case seems very adequate for illustrating C. Jung's idea that we cannot understand the very essence of neurosis and psychosis without mythology and history of culture. [Jung (1965); 65] The writer elucidates the story of Shyman's traumatized consciousness by providing various details of the lycanthropy beliefs. She introduces into the plot a number of elements associated with the lycanthropy myth: a belief that a person bitten by a werewolf may turn into one himself, that the transference usually occurs on full moon nights, that a werewolf may be killed only with a silver bullet marked with a cross, that a werewolf may recover a human shape when severely scolded by a human, etc. In "The Daguerreotype" the folklore legend of a werewolf serves to weave a story of crime, treachery, revenge and manipulation.

It might have looked strange to other characters of the novel and it may seem unbelievable to contemporary readers that, being a professional zoologist, Shyman Kahanezki was 'infected' with the mythical belief about himself as a potential werewolf. In our opinion, the fact may be accounted for by the following idea of Sergei Ushakin: "the posttraumatic state has nothing to do with a desire to forget the trauma. On the contrary, the striving to weave its traces into the structure of one's everyday existence becomes the essence of posttraumatic life<...> In the case of the posttraumatic syndrome "post" is not an indicator of overcoming what has occurred ("post" as "after") but an evidence of its insurmountability: one's biography and identity become impossible without narration about the trauma" [Ushakin (2009); 8]. Obviously in Shyman's case his trauma became "not a starting point but rather a number of dots, a trajectory, a chain of events and worries". [Ushakin (2009);7]

Shyman's traumatic experience became part of his life practices. What aggravated his situation was the fact that he had no one to share his problem with, he had to keep his reminiscences to himself, again and again reenacting the traumatic episode. S. Ushakin writes "The story of trauma is, as a rule, a story of silence, of suppressed, of unspoken, of wordless horror" [Ushakin (2009); 35]. It is not by chance that Shyman's conversation with Bahuslava in which he recounted to her the shocking episode of the wolves' attack became a starting point in his psychic recovery. Probably for the first time in his life he narrated the story of his trauma and thus made the first step on the way to overcoming the posttraumatic distress syndrome. What enhanced the remedial effect was Bahuslava's criticism of his belief in lycanthropy. The situation corresponds to what C. Caruth described as "the way in which our own trauma is

tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's word" [Caruth (1996); 4] Bahuslava's own traumatic experience evoked her profound empathy for Shyman's state which eventually led to their love.

The two young characters from "The Outer Circle" also experience an emotional shock but of another nature. The second half of this part of the novel treats of Haliash and Simka's dramatic adventures in the countryside where they went to see the estate which, as they had learnt from Haliash's great grandmother's narration, had belonged to his great grandfather Shyman Kahanezki. In the solitary place where they found the abandoned and half-dilapidated house they were assaulted by three villains who threatened to rape the girl and beat the boy. Here L. Rublewskaya again weaves the werewolf motive into her narration. Haliash had previously told his girlfriend that he used to feel strange on full moon nights and tried to avoid any confrontation for fear of going violent. It so happened that the dramatic encounter took place on an early full moon night. When attacked and seeing Simka in the arms of one of the hooligans Haliash went berserk. He violently dealt with the abusers, biting one of them and striking the other two severe blows which made them frantically retire. What intensified the assaulters' fright was Haliash's loud wolflike howling which stopped only when Simka managed to bring him back to his senses. It was on that day that Haliash first realized his origin and heredity. Previously he had been absolutely unaware of his roots, of the family legends, of his ancestors' coat-of-arms which had an image of a wolf in it.

Obviously the fact that Haliash thus gave vent to his fury was lucky for them both for it helped him overcome the shock and avoid its possible repercussions in the future. The revenge did not have to be postponed as it was in Nihel's case, but was accomplished on the spot which evidently facilitated Haliash's rehabilitation. Luckily, too, the abusers were not seriously wounded and fled for their own safety so that he did not need to live through the fear of punishment or experience the sense of guilt for the murder as Bohuslava, his great grandmother, had done. Now that he knew his ancestors' life story he would not let anyone manipulate his propensity for violence. The assault incident made him realize his own ability to effectively use his physical strength in case of extreme necessity. The lucky outcome of the incident, Haliash's repulse to the abusers makes readers believe that the shock Simka experienced would not have a lasting traumatic effect on her, either.

DISCUSSIONS

While writing “The Daguerrotype” L. Rublewskaya did not aim at making a literary research into the problem of trauma but involuntarily it turned out to be one. The prominence given to the traumatic experience of the heroes adds a psychological dimension to this multi-genre novel. It traces the process of shaping characters, analyses the effect of circumstances on human nature and behavior and exposes the ways of manipulating people’s minds.

CONCLUSIONS

The motive of trauma is one of the stable thematic components of Lyudmila Rublewskaya’s novel. The writer presents five traumatic cases with different causes and ways of overcoming their consequences. Three of them are brought about by dramatic or even tragic accidents which the personages of “The Inner Circle” of the novel either witness or experience in their childhood. Nihel’s and Bahuslava’s traumas are rooted in the political atmosphere of the time, while Shyman Kahanezki’s traumatic case is the result of a combination of an accident, mystification, or, rather superstition, and manipulation. The two personages from “The Outer Circle”, our contemporaries, are victims of today’s atmosphere of violence, of an, unfortunately, widespread belief in the rightness of the strong. Luckily they manage to rebuff the offence and thus jointly overcome their traumas.

In “The Daguerrotype” Rublewskaya intricately elaborates a plot where themes of violence, revenge, trauma, guilt, love, superstition, discovery, jealousy are closely intertwined to expose the motives behind the characters’ behaviour and to evoke the readers’ empathy for some of her personages and resentment for the others.

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